

Project Brief: scoping exercise to inform the development of a national Community Link Workers Programme for Scotland

Summary

Voluntary Health Scotland (VHS) will carry out a scoping exercise to help inform the Scottish Government's development of a national Community Link Workers programme. The research will identify the number and range of Link Worker initiatives currently being delivered by the third sector across Scotland.

VHS will gather intelligence from direct service providers across the third sector and, separately, from the 32 local third sector interfaces (TSIs). The TSIs provide a rich source of intelligence on the third sector at a local/PPP/health and social care partnership level, and some will be actively leading Link Worker type partnership initiatives.

VHS will produce and present a report that sets out the findings and provides recommendations about the scope to build on, enhance and develop existing third sector Link Worker provision across Scotland.

Introduction

Whilst Scotland's overall health has improved in the past 50 years, deep-seated inequalities remain. The gaps between those with the best and worst health and wellbeing still persist, some are widening, and too many Scots still die prematurely. Deprivation is the key determinant, although age, gender and ethnicity are also factors. Welfare reforms are exacerbating health inequalities and more people have complex needs and multi-morbidity. Additional barriers to taking up and benefitting from services include low literacy, fear, stigma, lack of confidence, social isolation, transport difficulties, language or communication differences.

The evidence shows that equitable access to good quality education, health, housing and other public and voluntary services can help address health inequalities. GPs are most people's first and main point of contact with the NHS but there are many constraints on GP practices actively helping patients to access appropriate support services in the wider community, including the extensive range of services provided by the third sector, e.g. befriending, walking groups, benefits advice, family support. These constraints relate to GPs' role, function, resources and knowledge of what is available in the community.

Strengthening the capacity of the primary health based workforce to act effectively on health inequalities is a Scottish Government priority. The 2015 SNP manifesto pledged: 'Scotland's most deprived communities need additional support, so we will recruit at least 250 Community Link Workers to work in GP surgeries and direct people to local services and support.' The Cabinet Secretary for Health reiterated this pledge in her opening statement at the health debate in the Scottish Parliament on 7th June 2016.

Link Worker approaches provide person-centred support to mitigate the negative impact of those social determinants associated with health inequalities. Link Workers are based in primary (and sometimes secondary) care in order to provide individual patients with a bridge to services in the wider community. The Scottish Government has funded Link Worker initiatives in Glasgow and Dundee, but is aware that there are a number of other Link Worker type initiatives across Scotland, mostly delivered by and/or in partnership with the third sector.

A range of terms, roles and responsibilities are used in conjunction with what we term Link Workers: social prescribing, signposting, one to one, group work, and supported self-management. Link Workers serve a role between primary care (most usually) and community and other services that might be of use to the person receiving the service. A crucial element of the Link Worker approach is the referral to other services once the person's needs have been identified. A better understanding of the extent and nature of the existing third sector-led provision is a necessary requirement for developing the sector's capacity to deploy a workforce of at least 250 Community Link Workers.

Aims and objectives of the research

1. To identify the number and range of Link Worker initiatives in primary care settings currently being delivered by the third sector across Scotland.
2. To inform the Scottish Government's development of a national Community Link Workers programme through the provision of this intelligence.

About VHS

VHS is the national network and intermediary for voluntary health organisations in Scotland. It exists to promote greater recognition of the voluntary sector's contribution to improving Scotland's health. It supports voluntary organisations to improve their knowledge and active engagement with health policy agendas. It facilitates cross-sectoral dialogue between voluntary organisations, policy makers, public services and academia/evidence makers, with the aim of supporting better policy making and practice. It collaborates extensively with other third sector intermediary bodies involved in health agendas.

Methodology

The proposed methodology is as follows:

1. Establish a small Reference Group to advise on the work and help expedite progress.
2. Establish working agreement about the likely structure for the final report.
3. Early preparation and scoping stage to include discussions with a small number of key informants, including Voluntary Action Scotland (VAS), the umbrella body for the 32 TSIs. This will help generate awareness and buy-in to the study and inform the design of a realistic questionnaire.

4. Early and ongoing communications to the VHS network and other third sector networks, to raise awareness of the study, alert people to the opportunity and benefits of participation, disseminate the questionnaires, etc. Using VHS e-bulletin, e-alerts, website, Twitter, and via other national intermediaries' mailings/newsletters (e.g. VAS, SCVO, CHEX, ACOSVO, Alliance, Third Sector Research Forum, etc.)
5. Design, test and then distribute **Questionnaire 1**, via Survey Monkey, to **third sector providers** across Scotland to find out more about the range and location of Link Worker type initiatives currently operating, and to ask about gaps in service provision.
6. Design, test and distribute **Questionnaire 2**, via Survey Monkey, to the **32 TSIs** across Scotland to find out more about the range and location of Link Worker type initiatives they are aware of, lead on or are a partner in, and to ask about gaps in service provision.
7. The questionnaires will include gathering information on the following characteristics of interest:
 - Relationship with GPs and primary care
 - Referral routes
 - Skills and experience of staff involved
 - Referral priorities
 - Person centred approaches using common assessment & goal setting tools
 - Health inequalities
 - Nature of relationship with service users
 - Gaps in local service provision to refer people onto
 - Governance structures
 - Running costs
 - Levels and types of funding and their sustainability
 - Nature of NHS support
 - Evaluation activity, any evidence of benefits/impact.
8. Conduct four small case studies to enhance survey data with more qualitative and illustrative information, with coverage of the following types of area:
 - Urban, non-deprived
 - Urban, deprived
 - Rural, non-deprived
 - Rural, deprived

9. Provide an initial draft of the report, and carry out revisions following discussion with the Reference Group.
10. Provide and present a final version of the report to the Reference Group and Scottish Government.

Timescale

The work will take place from mid-July 2016 and be completed by mid-January 2017.

1. **July/August:** establish Reference Group; appoint Researcher; speak to three or four key informants; establish mailing list and communications plan; agree report structure.
2. **August:** design and test the two Survey Monkey questionnaires; initial awareness raising across VHS network.
3. **September/October:** disseminate and promote the two questionnaires.
4. **October/November:** analyse Survey Monkey results; identify organisations for case studies.
5. **November:** case study interviews; continued analysis of questionnaire findings; drafting of version 1 of report.
6. **December:** analysis/write up of case studies.
7. **January:** presentation of final report to Reference Group and to Scottish Government.

Delivery

VHS has appointed **Simon Jaquet Consultancy Services Ltd** to carry out the research, analysis and report writing. Simon Jaquet is an experienced researcher with extensive experience of mapping exercises.

Contact

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